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ON PAGE 1

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Ministers face barrage over spy 'scandal'

AMID growing allegations of security lapses at the centre of Britain's electronic "eaves-dropping" operations, senior ministers moved last night to curb speculation that they face an espionage scandal of the gravity of the Philby — Burgess—Maclean affair.

While not diminishing the seriousness of secrets leaks if any have occurred, from the government's communications headquarters in Cheltenham—the heart of the worldwide surveillance network—the ministers were saying that, so far, there was no evidence of a spy ring in place at the establishment.

Despite the moves to quieten public anxiety about possible national security breaches, the government will be faced this week with a series of questions from MPs about the security of the electronic intelligence network.

Conditions at Cheltenham have been causing considerable concern among current and former employees of the establishment. One senior staff member with the highest level of security clearance who left recently told The Sunday Times yesterday that there had been complaints for years among his colleagues about the possibility of security failures.

The system of positive vetting of government employees—under which an employee's background is investigated at intervals during employment—was not functioning properly, he said. As a result, security investigators were faced with a backlog of staff checks.

"American staff who work there, and are used to much stricter conditions, are horrified at the easy attitude," he said. "The backlog of vetting built up because of lack of staff. The periods between vetting just got longer and longer."

Even at the simple level of gate security, vigilance was not being maintained. The former employee spoke of one incident when a senior man entered the headquarters wearing a security pass belonging to his wife and was neither stopped nor questioned. With about 4,000 people employed at the communications headquarters, the pass inspection had become cursory.

Parcels sent to the base by British Rail Red Star system were usually collected by Cheltenham taxi drivers for delivery to the headquarters.

In 1980, a former official of the base, Jock Kane, accused

that it risked penetration by foreign spies. "There was no inquiry into my allegations," he said yesterday. "Ninety per cent of all foreign intelligence comes through the headquarters and when one thinks of how MI5 and MI6 were penetrated I can't see how this organisation was exempt."

Mrs Thatcher, as head of the intelligence services, will face questions this week both about security at Cheltenham and the government's failure to debate the contents of the Diplock report.

Lord Diplock was asked to report on government personnel security in the wake of allegations to treachery against Sir Roger Hollis, the former head of MI5. Diplock stressed the problem that the computer storage of intelligence data had created. He said that a leak of such computerised information would have considerably more serious security implications than had hitherto been thought possible.

Parliamentary concern about a potential national security scandal has been expressed by MPs of the three major parties. Alan Beith, the Liberal chief whip, will ask Mrs Thatcher this week whether she is satisfied with security arrangements at the communications headquarters, and will seek an assurance that adequate steps have been taken to improve security in the light of the Diplock report.

And backbench Conservative MP Geoffrey Dickens (Huddersfield West) is to call for an emergency debate tomorrow on computer security. He said: "Our computers in this country appear to be leaking like sieves. Once Nato and the United States become aware that our computers are infiltrated, they will not be sending us the security information we so badly need."

Two Labour MPs, Arthur Davidson (Accrington) and Donald Anderson (Swansea East) have called on Mrs Thatcher to comment on Diplock's concern about computer security.

At the heart of Britain's electronic intelligence network, Cheltenham receives and analyses information from listen-

people. Working closely with the American National Security Agency, it analyses military, diplomatic, international and commercial radio, telephone, tele and computer traffic.

The computer technology used by both Britain and America is the most advanced available. The American agency has 11 acres of computers at its vast headquarters near Washington. Cheltenham has an American-built system called Tandem Non Stop which is designed to handle and store vast amounts of electronic traffic for subsequent translation and analysis.

The importance of the collection of electronic intelligence is underlined by the huge investment made by both countries. The Cheltenham headquarters with its ancillary Ministry of Defence listening stations costs hundreds of millions a year to run. Any security breach clearly threatens a massive enterprise.

Cracking the Russian military and diplomatic codes is the most vital job carried out by the base. If the Soviets had a clear indication of which type of their signals were being read by the western allies, the consequences could be severe;

The joint technical language service department at Cheltenham plays a key role in breaking the Russian codes. Its language specialists not only translate broken coded messages but offer considerable advice to the codebreakers themselves.

Cheltenham played a pivotal role in the Falklands crisis. Increased radio traffic in Argentina was picked up in the days before the fleet sailed. Analysts discovered that the Argentinian army was mobilising and picked up orders which convinced them that an invasion was imminent.

The base's intelligence reports are sent to the joint intelligence committee which reports directly to the prime minister. The head of Cheltenham headquarters since 1978 is Sir Brian John Maynard Tovey, who went to work for the organisation in 1950. One former director, Sir Leonard Hooper, took over Britain's top intelligence post, as head of the joint intelligence committee in 1973.

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